FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE INDIGENOUS STUDENTS' SUCCESS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS PERSPECTIVE OF THE INDIGENOUS TEACHERS

NORWALIZA ABDUL WAHAB

Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjong Malim, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

High dropouts among Orang Asli students have become an issue as it was reported nearly 34% of those who had completed their primary schooling did not pursue their studies at the secondary level. This might be because they lack interests in academic subjects at schools. The Orang Asli was also identified as one of the most vulnerable groups in Malaysia, with a disproportionately high incidence of poverty and hardcore poverty. In 2006, 33.5% and 15.4% of the Orang Asli were identified as poor and hardcore poor, respectively. However, teachers with an affirming perspective believe that students from indigenous groups are actually a capable learners, even when those children enrol schools with their own ways of thinking, and behaving that differentiate from the dominant culture's norms. A substantial literature indicates teachers' beliefs and attitudes strongly influence students' perception and behaviors in the classroom. This qualitative case study identified two Orang Asli teachers' perspectives regarding the factors that potentially enhance the success of Orang Asli students in secondary schools. Data were collected using three instruments: individual semi-structured interview's protocol, document analysis and classroom observations' checklist. The research findings show that the factors that influence the Orang Asli students' success in secondary schools include: (a) their schooling experiences and commitment to the indigenous culture, (b) their efforts to succeed despite the Orang Asli students' underachievement, discrimination and marginalization within school and society, (c) their beliefs about the importance of indigenous language to academic success, (d) their expectations of the Orang Asli students and (e) their relationship with Orang Asli students and families. The results stress on importance of enhancing the strength and values of cultural diversity, developing a sense for human rights and respecting for cultural diversity, and challenging discrimination in society.

KEYWORDS: Indigenous, Teachers, Indigenous, Students, Teacher's Perspective, Secondary, Schools, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

There is a significant body of literature and evidence to suggest that non-indigenous teachers simply do not know enough about how to teach indigenous children. Hence, it is our attempt to understand the issues related to the education of indigenous children in the Malay Peninsula, or specifically the Orang Asli children. Despite the best intentions and commitment from many mainstream teachers, most have inadequate understandings of appropriate pedagogies and the complexities of indigenous cultures, knowledge and identities (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009; Malin & Maidment, 2003; Partington, 2003; Villegas, Neugebauer, & Venegas, 2008).

While some believe that the cultural-context is the most important factor of Orang Asli's education, other researchers point to the "teacher factor" as significant to student's success and it is becoming a pertinent area of study (Tatto, 1996). A substantial literature shows that teachers' beliefs and attitudes strongly influence their expectations and behaviors in the classroom (Byrnes, Kiger, & Manning, 1997; Cross, 1993; Kagan, 1992; Lewis, 1990; Villegas, 1992). Research also suggests that teachers build their own expectations about student learning, their treatment of students,

and what the students ultimately learn (Pajares, 1993; Pang & Sablan, 1998; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Teachers with an affirming perspective are more likely to believe that students from non-dominant groups are better learners, even when those children enrol in schools with their own ways of thinking and behaviors that are different from the dominant culture's norms (Delpit, 1995). On the other hand, mainstream teachers with limiting exposure to indigenous pedagogy are more likely to possess negative views about indigenous students' potential. Dubious about the indigenous students' ability to achieve, those teachers are more likely to hold low academic expectations for them and ultimately to treat them in ways likely to suppress their learning's potentials (Nieto, 2000, Payne, 1994).

In Malaysia, most educational researchers agree that teachers play a significant role in Orang Asli students' academic achievement (Tang, 1997).However, little is known about how teachers define and interpret their teaching experiences. Although general studies have been conducted on teachers' attitudes toward Orang Asli students (Santoro, 2009) only few explore how teachers feel and think about educating Orang Asli students in secondary schools. Rarely, however, do reports focus on the schooling of Orang Asli students, whose success in school seems thwarted by many educational barriers (Wuei & Jang, 2000). Many complex factors have been cited as contributing to the low academic achievement of Orang Asli students. Some of those factors reside in the macro-context in which schools exist, such as racial isolation (Li, 1982), a high level of poverty (Lin, 2000), and the difficulty of learning adjustment (Fu, 2001). Even though macro-context may seem to be a critical factor in the education of the Orang Asli students, this study focuses primarily on the Orang Asli teachers at the micro-level, specifically their perspectives on teaching Orang Asli students in the secondary schools.

This qualitative case study involving an Orang Asli school in Pahang the biggest state in West Malaysia. Pahang also has the biggest populations on Orang Asli in Malaysia. The two indigenous teachers who participated in this study were teachers of Orang Asli students at a secondary school in Kuala Lipis and Cameron Highland, Pahang. Both of them are from Semai's tribe, one of the biggest indigenous tribes in Peninsular Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

Perspectives are usually the proper or accurate point of view or the ability to see and it value laden, implicit and always challenging to uncover. Beliefs about diversity can be particularly too delicate to talk about because of the teachers' wishes to be politically correct or because of their fear, or because of their vulnerability if they admit to beliefs that might be perceived as racist or prejudiced (Paige, 1993). Although research suggests that teachers' perspectives have great impact on their practices, the examination of those perspectives presents several methodological challenges for researchers (Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992). Some researchers have adopted an interpretive paradigm to understand teachers' beliefs (e.g., Cocharn-Smigh & Lytle, 1995; Lipman, 1998; Montero-Sieburth, 1996).

The interpretive model of research allows a focus on teachers' perspectives as well as the meaning they made from their perspectives. Rather than using inventories, a researcher, often in collaboration with the teachers, draws from various data sources to understand the perspectives of participants. This type of data is often referred to as emic perspective which is described as the 'insider's' or indigenous' interpretation of or reasons for their customs or beliefs. It describes what things mean to the members of a society because the local meaning is of central significance.

This study uses an interpretive approach to describe different aspects of teachers' perspectives. It addresses five research questions

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- What were the teachers' schooling experiences and how did they become a teacher?

- What are the teachers' beliefs about the students' potential to succeed despite the widespread of underachievement, discrimination, and marginalization among Orang Asli students?

- What are the teachers' beliefs about indigenous languages and how importance is the indigenous language to academic success?

- What is the teachers' expectation on their Orang Asli students?

- To what extent is the relation between the teachers and their Orang Asli students and their family?

Given that there is little research about the schooling experiences of Orang Asli students in secondary schools in Malaysia, this study begins to fill the "knowledge gap" by examining teachers' perspectives about Orang Asli students. Indeed, there are various dimensions and components of the schooling experience. This study focuses on exploring the indigenous teachers' perspectives about their beliefs on indigenous students' potential to succeed in a secondary school setting.

This qualitative research uses an interpretive case study approach, which is an appropriate methodology when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991).Yin (1984) points to several reasons for selecting a case study method: "Case studies are the preferred strategy when how or why questions are being posed when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life contexts" (p. 13). The case study is appropriate for this study, which seeks to delineate how teachers think about teaching indigenous students and the meanings behind their statements. Tesch (1990) defines qualitative research as "research [is] not concerned with variables and their measurements" (p. 46) This definition tells what qualitative is not, as opposed to what it is.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and returned to individual participants for checking and verification. Analysis of the data occurred in five stages (Marshall & Rossman, 1989): (1) organizing the data, (2) coding the data, (3) generating categories, (4) testing emerging categories, and (5) searching for alternative hypotheses and explanations. A computer software program, *Atlas-Ti* qualitative analysis software package, was used to manage data coding, create categories, and examine relationships among the categories. The process began with the open coding: an analytic process by which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in the data (Strauss & Corbin 1990).Then the concepts that could be grouped under more abstract categories for ways to link those categories according to their dimensions, themes and assertions a process termed "axial coding" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These groupings were continually tested against the data sets derived from interviews. The *Atlas-Ti* program also provided a historical trail of new and changed coding and categories. The program enabled the intersection of categories or themes with specific participants. All coding emerged from the contents of the data rather than predetermined applied categories, thus pattern-matching created the coding categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988). Sentence-by-sentence coding was used first and then paragraph coding using research questions as a guide. Each coded excerpt was compared with the next, searching for similarities and differences. Once all the data had been categorized, each pile of data was examined for congruity (Patton, 1990). The original codes were checked for consistency and overlap, and then merged into five main categories that reflected the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The two Orang Asli teachers' experiences and perspectives were qualitatively analyzed within the interpretative paradigm. The teachers were interviewed regarding: (a) their schooling experiences, (b) their views of Orang Asli students' underachievement, discrimination and marginalization, (c) their beliefs about indigenous languages, (d) their expectations of Orang Asli students, and (e) their relationship with Orang Asli students and families.

Teachers' Schooling Experiences and Commitment to the Indigenous Culture

Throughout the interviews, the two Orang Asli teachers, named Maya and Salma talked about their own personal and schooling experiences as a main factor in their perspectives about teaching Orang Asli students. Those personal experiences were crucial factors that differentiate them from other teachers. For instance, Maya said, *"My formal education and training that I get from college was something that I expected. Nothing to prepare me to teach Indigenous school and it meant for me to become as less Semai as possible."* Before studying at the Teachers College, Maya had never *"thought about my indigenous background seriously like what so great of being a Semai?."* It was there when she began to realize how much she had cover up her indigenous identity. Her experiences with other indigenous trainees in Teacher Training College had motivated her to get her indigenous identity back. She believed that her involvement *"made me more conscious about my own culture and the culture of others."* Meanwhile Salma had problem in primary school because of her limited ability to speak Malay language. She remembered how frustrated she was when she had difficulty in adjusting herself in school. As a result, she worked very hard to improve her Malay language by reading books and watching many Malay movies, yet she has never forsaken her identity as Semai *"There were some Malay kids in my class and they would call me "Dumb or stupid just because I didn't know how to speak their language. They also didn't like to play with us the Orang Asli because they said we were stupid and dirty."*

Both Maya and Salma had faced discrimination and rejection during their school days. They also realized that other Orang Asli children had suffered the same problem. When they became more critically aware of the marginalization of their culture in the school, they became very conscious of the differences in treatment they received. Thus, she felt that the Orang Asli have to do something about it. Maya said, *"I don't think other people have idea what it's like to be an Orang Asli in this country. Nobody actually cares about us and the learning experiences of Orang Asli students have not received much attention."* Maya and Salma developed a consciousness about their culture and that motivated them to become a teacher with strong determination to make a difference in Orang Asli students' lives. After Maya finished her teacher training, she taught in a suburban school where Orang Asli students were a minority. Salma too chose teaching because of her commitment to uplift indigenous people. Both Maya and Salma knew that many Orang Asli students attended public schools and lived with a sort of conflict because the culture of their schools was different from that of their homes (Lin, 2001). This might be one of the factors of high dropouts among Orang Asli students as it was reported nearly 34% of those who had completed their primary schooling did not pursue their studies at the secondary level.

Maya and Salma's schooling experiences were not something new; they noted that many Orang Asli children who attended the public secondary schools experienced the same discrimination and conflict as they did. Their observations are consistent with Tang's (1997) research findings that suggest that indigenous students in schools "feel despair, disillusionment, alienation, frustration, hopelessness, powerlessness, rejection, and estrangement, all elements of negative views of the self" (p. 38). Maya and Salma tried hard to make a difference, not only by offering extra help to their Orang Asli students, but also by extending their efforts to indigenous families and communities.

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The Discrimination and Marginalization of Orang Asli Students

Ramlee Mustapha et al. (2010) argued that the main suppressive factor in the development of human capital of Orang Asli is the incapacity of the local leaders in bringing changes for Orang Asli community. However, other studies suggest that home-school relationships are important to improving educational outcomes for all students (Hill & Taylor, 2004), and particularly for indigenous students (Hunter & Schwab, 2003). Maya and Salma blamed discrimination and pointed out inequalities within schools and society. Maya believed that Orang Asli students were marginalized and discriminated in many aspects of education and life. She commented that in order to teach Orang Asli students effectively, issues of school curriculum, teacher expectations and ethnic discrimination must be dealt seriously. She described the curriculum as too "Malay-centric." Salma's commented that many schools did not consider indigenous languages as important as other languages. She sensed rejection from the school administrators who told her that the school's limited facility was inadequate for indigenous language and cultural program.She argued, *"I think the schools really don't care about indigenous languages and our cultural programs. That would make me think the Orang Asli students are not important. Malay and English languages are taught in every class. Even the Chinese and Indian students have their People Own Language (POL) classes, why can't we have one?"* However, the school believes that selecting English language as one of the niche areas gives it better chance to improve the level of English language competency among the students including the Orang Asli in order to obtain a good job in the future.

One of the factors that thwart of the Orang Asli students' success was that they did not have Orang Asli teachers as a role model in their school. The lack of role model was viewed by the respondents as one of the critical problems faced by the indigenous students. Maya hoped that more Orang Asli teachers are trained and employed in public schools where a substantial number of Orang Asli students are enrolled Nevertheless she believed that the main issue was the school's general marginalization of Orang Asli's parents, students, and teachers. Orang Asli students had difficulty adjusting themselves in a school which they felt excluded and rejected. That was evident in Maya's experience *"I had difficulties in learning about history...writing an essay and things like that.When I went to school, there was nothing about indigenous culture at all. I don't think a lot of other people have any idea what it's like for Orang Asli people in this country."* With regard to the widespread underachievement of Orang Asli students, the two Orang Asli teachers seemed to point to Ministry of Education in explaining the problem. The gist of their perspective was that many Orang Asli students, particularly those from low-income families were estranged from schools because of their indigenous background.

The Importance of Indigenous Languages

The "lost" of indigenous language was felt by Maya and Salma due to their schooling in mainstream school and in their teacher training college. Although Maya and Salma were both of Semai heritage, they experienced significant challenges with regard to their native language. Not being able to speak her native tongue fluently made Maya feel only "half Semai." Although she felt comfortable identifying herself as a Semai publicly, she had tough time talking to elders in Semai because she was not fluent in the language. She said that *"Sometimes you would feel like a stranger when you were questioned by the others about your ability to speak Semai*

Speaking Semai in her school was seen as *"not proper by teachers and students and sometimes other students laugh at the way they [indigenous students] speak,"* In addition, Salma reported, *"Even now, some Orang Asli people are shy to speak their native language in public."* The fear of being 'different' kept the Orang Asli students from identifying themselves ethnically which in turn intensified the stigma at school. As a teacher, Salma wanted to stop that practice. She believed that speaking her mother tongue was the first step in *"identifying who we are,"* and *"making a difference in our*

society." Maya and Salma also shared the opinion that language was a key to understanding the culture of students, their community, and, more important, their "ways of knowing" or learning (Bollin & Finkel, 1995; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Mercado, 2001). That is very important for teachers to understand because indigenous students are more likely to feel "at home' when they believe their cultures are being valued and accepted at school.

Teachers Expectation

In order to be an effective teacher it is necessary 'to really see, to really know the students we must teach' (Delpit, 1995, p. 183). 'Really knowing' students means knowing what knowledge they bring to the classroom and how their cultural practices, values and beliefs shape them as learners and, as producers of knowledge (Castagno, McKinley & Brayboy, 2008; Santoro, 2009). Many teachers however, struggle to really know Indigenous students. In this study, the two Orang Asli teachers have had high expectations for their Orang Asli students. Maya believed the power of education can make vast difference in the lives of indigenous students. Her mission was to build on indigenous students' strengths and to create a sense of will power that they actually can perform as good or better than the other students. That was a powerful theme in her beliefs about teaching Orang Asli students. She did not agree with those of her colleagues who blamed Orang Asli students and parents for their lack of interest in education. "*I know that these Orang Asli children are not slow or stupid. Many teachers think Orang Asli students cannot catch up with academic subjects. Many Orang Asli students just give up when teachers show this kind of attitude. This is self fulfilling prophecy.* Salma said, "*Sometimes teachers adjust the syllabus by lowering of expectations such as not giving Orang Asli students academically demanding work or assignments. I don't think this is going to help them to learn.*" The respondents were eager to point out however that despite what seems to be a less formal approach to relationships with students, their expectations of Indigenous students were high and that the nature of their informal relationships did not mean they compromised standards. Salma claims, "*I stand firm on what I say. I back what I say and I'm very fair with all children but with the Orang Asli student, you know I'm hard on them. I just want them to excel like others. No excuses.*"

There is a fine line between wanting to adjust the syllabus to meet the student's capability and actually challenging the students. Teachers' expectations for indigenous students may affect the way they teach indigenous students. Brophy (1983) points out that the negative effects of teacher expectations can be either direct or indirect. Giving low-expectation students limited exposure to new learning material or less learning time will inhibit their learning in very direct ways. Teachers who hold such negative views, who are unsympathetic to socio-cultural differences, and who are inexperienced in the pedagogy of indigenous students can fail to provide effective learning environment (Partington, Richer, Godfrey, Harslett, & Harrison, 1999).

The Relationship with the Indigenous

Throughout the interview and observations, Maya and Salma had shown some kinds of special relationships with their indigenous students through the usage of their own language. Maya and Salma fondly referred indigenous people as "our we and us'. For example, when describing the life of Orang Asli students in the school, Maya said, "*Our tribes are living nearby and the we are close to each other.*" Salma recalled, "*We were pretty happy with our lives and I don't understand why they just can't leave our ancestral land alone.*"

The Orang Asli teachers worked hard continuously inside and outside the classroom as they built their relationship with Orang Asli students in the school. Maya's perspective about the quality of a good teacher for indigenous students placed a great deal of responsibility on herself. She said, "*I need to do something for them As long as I'm their teacher.*" For instance, she recruited a few Orang Asli girls for her netball team and provided them after-school tutoring

program for free. She felt fulfilled when she learned that these Orang Asli students had made a good progress on their schoolwork and academic achievement. She told me she worked under unique circumstances that isolated her as an Orang Asli teacher. For her, one way to overcome the isolation was to engage in collaborative inquiry. Consequently, she formed an indigenous teachers group for indigenous cultural study. The teachers met from time to time to exchange ideas about teaching and other matters related to indigenous people. The meetings provided an opportunity to share experiences, perspectives, and challenges. One of the goals of the group was to "*prepare ourselves to teach Orang Asli students in the schools where we serve and help them in every way that we can.*" The group also sought to develop an ability to screen out stereotyped and discrimination and teach those skills to their students.

The indigenous teachers shared more common experiences with indigenous children and felt they could build a trusting relationship with them. Salma agreed that the presence of Orang Asli teachers in school was important. As an Orang Asli teacher and former student, she believed "*It would be greatly beneficial if there were someone who really understood what you had been through. I'll talk to the girls and walk with them around the school compound at recess time and ask them about their well beings.*" She was believed that the Orang Asli students would learn if a relationship based on "*mutual trust and concern,*"and "*all of us is like one big family,*". Things will change if the school teachers are actively engaged with the parents in the community and it's visible, it's seen, it's recognized, the children see it and the parents will say, well '*OK, there's nothing wrong with Miss Salma, she's nice and good teacher.*' Salma also committed herself to teaching the indigenous language at her home. As she told me, "*my greatest goal is to educate Orang Asli children about themselves and their heritage through their own language.*" She believed that those students need teachers who "*know what it was like, growing up as an Orang Asli student in a predominantly Malay school system,*" and that she could help them by using their mother tongue and cultural background.

Finally, indigenous teachers are capable to take advantage of their connections with the help of their indigenous social and cultural networks, and common experiences. Although Maya and Salma were different in numerous aspects of teaching and pedagogy, they shared one common goal - commitment, values, expectations for their students, and relationship with families and community. The indigenous parents were more at ease talking to Maya. When they have some issues to be brought up, they preferred that Maya be present at the meeting. However, schools can often appear intimidating and hostile places to Indigenous parents who have negative memories of their own schooling. They are therefore often reluctant to be involved in their children's school education. This is frequently taken by teachers to mean that Indigenous parents have few aspirations for their children and don't care about their children's education. Some of her colleagues also saw her as a moderator between the school and indigenous families. Salma's teaching Semai at the community centre enabled her to connect with Orang Asli students more easily. Salma always invited indigenous parents to participate in their children's education. Although both of Maya and Salma regretted the erosion of the indigenous community and the family cohesiveness that had been a mainstay in their own development, they did not view the families as deficient. Both showed their sense of responsibility not only to the children and their families but also to the community. Maya and Salma's experiences and perspectives are consistent with Qiu's (1998) findings that suggest that indigenous teachers are preferred by indigenous students because the teachers are perceived as parents, mentor or elders by the indigenous students. Maya and Salma understand the benefits of creating a sense of respect and trust with their indigenous students that translate to creating an effective learning environment.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this case study was to interpret the two participating Orang Asli teachers' experiences with their indigenous students at a public secondary school. The study found that those teachers' experiences and perspectives reflected the importance of promoting the strength and value of cultural diversity. Their teaching practices and pedagogical beliefs came about as a result of their schooling experience in Malay dominant schools – in which they experienced marginalization and discrimination. They demonstrated a sense of urgency as well as a personal desire to make change for themselves and for their Orang Asli students in the school. The indigenous teachers often acted as surrogate parents to the indigenous children they taught. They seemed more able than other teachers to meet the challenge through their relationship with indigenous communities, social networks, the culture and common experiences. Although there is no single way of being indigenous, teachers who have grown up and completed their schooling as indigenous learners have a wealth of experience and knowledge about the pedagogies that are likely to be successful for indigenous students. They understand indigenous worldviews and have first-hand experience of the challenges facing indigenous students in the schooling systems. Thus, this research shows that indigenous teachers can potentially play significant roles as educators and as mentors to indigenous students.

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